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An Interview with William Colby

JIM HARTZ: All of our interview time in this hour this morning will be devoted to the CIA and its activities and its reactions to the extraordinary number of public disclosures made about it since the Watergate scandal. And for this, CIA Director William Colby is in our Washington News Center with Today Washington correspondent Douglas Kiker and NBC News correspondent Ford Rowan, who covers the CIA.

Doug?

DOUGLAS KIKER: Thank you, Jim. Good morning, everybody.

Mr. Colby, the CIA has been under heavy fire from one quarter or another for over a year now. Your defenders say the attacks, the disclosures have served to undermine the CIA's effectiveness. Has the agency's effectiveness been diminished?

DIRECTOR WILLIAM COLBY: Of course, it's been hurt. You can't possibly go through a year such as this of denunciations all around the world, accusations of all sorts of things, exposures of our operations, exposures of the names of our people without causing foreigners who work with us and foreign intelligence services to draw back and evidence fear of being involved with us and being subject to the kind of exposure and attack that has been going on.

On the other hand, I must say that we still produce the best intelligence in the world.

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KIKER: Thank you. As Jim told you, Mr. Colby will be with us for the rest of this hour. But first the news, and for that, here's Lou Wood in New York.

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HARTZ: The Central Intelligence Agency has been the subject of almost continuous investigation this past year by both houses of Congress, investigations that have led to charges that the CIA has, at times, violated both its own charter and the law. Defenders of the CIA says the investigations, along with the various news stories and exposes, have weakened the agency and endangered its agents. To talk about this throughout this hour, CIA Director William Colby is in our Washington News Center with Today Washington correspondent Douglas Kiker and NBC News correspondent Ford Rowan, who covers the CIA. And I should mention that Mr. Colby is the outgoing Director of the CIA and is expected to be replaced soon, possibly within this month, by George Bush. But he is still the active Director, with long experience in the agency.

Doug?

KIKER: Thank you, Jim.

Mr. Colby, a few moments ago you said that the effectiveness of the agency had been diminished because of the exposures and the investigations. Just before Christmas, Richard Welch, who was Station Chief of the CIA in Athens, was gunned down by three masked men. Subsequently people have said that because Mr. Welch was identified in magazines like Counter-Spy, he was identified in the Athens News as a CIA agent, that this endangered his life and it's endangering the lives of other agents.

Do you agree with this?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I think any of us in the intelligence business obviously run risks. I've run risks and my associates have run risks over many years. And that's part of the game. But at the same time, there's a question of how much risk we are asked to run. And I particularly find it reprehensible to find a deliberate effort to identify our people by fellow Americans. Those who are opposed to the activities of CIA I think have every right to appeal to the Congress to terminate it, to change its rules, whatever. But I find it particularly startling that an American would deliberate finger a fellow American serving his country in a dangerous post abroad.

KIKER: Would you like to see legislation of some sort which would make it against the law for former CIA agents to write exposes, let's say, or for magazines like Counter-Spy

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to publish agents' names?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I'm a great believer in the First Amendment, Mr. Kiker. But the fact is that we do need some better protection of our secrets. We have secrets in American society. They're important to our democracy: the secret ballot box, the secrecy of a grand jury proceeding, the secrecy of our income tax returns. All these things are secrets and are protected by law.

I think good intelligence is important to the protection of our democracy and our country. And good intelligence does need some secrets -- not all secrets. And that's perhaps part of our trouble -- is that the old tradition of intelligence was that everything was secret. We've brought that out now and we've made public a great deal of what we can. But there are limits if we are to maintain a good intelligence service.

FORD ROWAN: Mr. Colby, in asking for strengthened laws to prohibit agents and former agents and employees from divulging secrets or the identities of other employees of the intelligence community, will you seek to expand -- will the CIA seek to expand the government's power to obtain injunctions and restrain the publication or broadcast of this information?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I have long advocated a law which would allow me to require an ex-employee to keep the secrecy agreement he made when he came to work with us. We did go to court in one case against one of our ex-employees. We happened to hear that he was going to publish before he actually published. And we got an injunction, and this was reviewed in the courts and this was approved. At the same time, if he had already published, I must say I would have been on very weak grounds to do anything about it.

And I think that we do need a law that imposes the discipline of secrecy on us who go into the intelligence profession. I do not believe it ought to apply to those outside the intelligence profession.

KIKER: Have you urged President Ford to introduce such legislation?

DIRECTOR COLBY: I have urged. And just recently the Department of Justice has joined with me and agreed that this would be a good thing to do.

KIKER: Let's turn for a minute to Angola. First of all quickly, what's going on there? There're reports of big victories by the Popular Front -- that's the other side, of course -- this past week. And we hear now that three Soviet

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ships are heading in. Of course, the Soviets have been anchoring in Conakry Harbor for sometime. Are they coming there as a show of force? Is the Popular Front moving ahead? Can you just -- and how will we respond to all this?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I think what has happened in Angola over the past year or so has been that the Portuguese determined that they would give the country its independence. And there were three contending groups for that succession to the government. The various African nations on a number of occasions got the three groups together and got them to agree to collaborate. But the communist supported group has insisted on a total domination of the situation. They began receiving military aid from the Soviet Union in October, 1974. They began to build up their strength. Starting last July, they drove the other groups out of the capital by armed force and were driving them into the countryside and, hopefully, to their side, over the edge of the border.

Then the other groups got some help and they came back to some extent. At that point, the Soviet Union substantially escalated its aid in air supply, in tanks, artillery, all this sort of thing. And in the last week or two, the Popular Movement, the Soviet supported group, has made somewhat of an attack, particularly in the north, not so much in the south.

ROWAN: Mr. Colby, the covert action of the United States in Angola has come under criticism from Congress, obviously. There're efforts to cut off American aid. I'd like to ask you about the extent of American aid. I have heard figures that our aid to Zaire will jump from three million to nineteen million dollars next year. Is that money being funneled into Angola?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I think there're several categories of aid to the neighboring countries. The military aid program is one that is reported to Congress and done publicly. There's no question about that. And there are certain proposals for military aid to Zaire.

Any other aid I really am not at liberty to discuss in detail or even to confirm officially. But the fact is that any effort by the United States, by CIA, other than intelligence gathering, is the subject of a finding by the President that it's important to the national security, and it's been reported to six committees of the Congress.

KIKER: Let me ask you this. Angola would seem to be a perfect example of the dilemma I think we find ourselves in. Congress wants more say-so in CIA covert operations. The American people, I believe, want to know what's going on -- no more invisible governments. Yet you say, and let's say with accuracy,

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that the CIA's effectiveness is being destroyed by all of these demands and disclosures.

Let's take Angola. What's the answer?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I think the answer is that if you take, in this Bicentennial year, a quotation from the Committee of Secret Correspondence of the Continental Congress in 1776, their comment was that 'we find, by fatal experience, that the Congress consists of too many members to keep secrets.' I think that's a little advice to us.

Now we have a new law passed last December which requires us to report to six committees. Almost everything that's been reported to those six committees has been exposed in the press. I see in a quotation in the press yesterday that two members of the Congress confirmed, by telephone, that I had given them a briefing on some secret activity. Now this is not a way to protect secrets, particularly when some of the activities that we conduct we conduct with the knowing approval and even, in one situation, the urging of one of the committees of the Congress to conduct a particular activity.

KIKER: Mr. Colby, we're going to have to pause for a few moments. We'll be back with William Colby, Director of the CIA. The Today Show will continue after we pause for this station break.

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KIKER: Good morning again. We are here with Ford Rowan, NBC News correspondent who covers the CIA, and William Colby, who is the Director of the CIA.

And Mr. Colby, we were talking about the dilemma of an intelligence agency that feels it must operate in private, a Congress that wants to know more about covert activities and yet, as you were saying just now, seems not to be able to keep the secrets that you confide in them with. That's good English. Could you go on with that thought?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I think the problem is that we have to determine, we Americans, how to conduct a responsible intelligence operation. I think we insist that we in the intelligence profession be responsible and that we operate under the law and under the Constitution. But I think we also have to insist that our members of Congress act in the constitutional frame that they're set up to be -- the representatives of the people. That doesn't mean that they're a conduit for every bit of information they get in secret to immediately display it to the public. They are asked to be responsible, to stand

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up, to make judgments, and to assume responsibilities for knowing things that they cannot pass on. Otherwise we cannot run an intelligence service.

I think we've had a very hard time this past year. And it reminds me a little bit of the child's fable about Chicken Little. You remember the acorn fell on Chickie Little's head, and Chicken Little ran down the street saying that the sky was falling. Well, I think that in a way this past year, we have had an example of that kind of performance. We did drop on our heads the fact that CIA did some wrong things over the past twenty-eight years. I think those were few and far between. We have corrected them. But I think we have a situation in which we have dominated our discussions with denunciations of the evil deeds of CIA on a very limited base and have totally lost our proportion, sense of proportion about the importance of intelligence, the excellence of intelligence, the few misdeeds that we did conduct, and the fact that we've corrected them.

ROWAN: Mr. Colby, I'd like to ask you a question about one of the covert operations that the Congress has now exposed, and that's the operation in Chile, which they said consisted of propaganda, bribery, economic retaliation, fomenting a coup, and support for right wing terror groups.

Now you're a lawyer, and I'm going to ask you in this context. My reading of the U. N. Charter, Article II, Section IV, the 1965 U. N. General Assembly Declaration on the Impermissibility of Intervention in Domestic Affairs of States, the 1970 U. N. General Assembly Declaration on Friendly Relations Among States, the Charter of the Organization of American States, and one, two, three, four, five, six, seven international treaties that the United States is a party to indicates that that was a violation of international law.

Now I don't blame CIA, because you were doing what President Ford [sic] and Henry Kissinger said. But in all of those meetings about Chile, was there ever once a word, one whisper from the back of the room -- "Maybe it's illegal?"

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I think, in the first place, President Ford had nothing to do with Chile.

ROWAN: I'm sorry. President Nixon.

DIRECTOR COLBY: We had....

KIKER: You've got a minute, incidentally, to answer that.

DIRECTOR COLBY: We had a series of Presidents who told

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us to do things in Chile: President Kennedy, President Johnson, President Nixon. There's no question about it. Any activity we did in Chile was also reported to the Congress at the time in the manner in which it had set itself up at that time.

Now the question of international law -- of course, it's not a law in the same sense that the law that we have in our country applies -- in sovereignty. And I think you have to look for international custom, as well as international law, to see what nations do and are expected to do.

KIKER: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but our time is up for now. Mr. Colby will be spending the rest of this hour with us, William Colby, Director of the CIA. But it's time now for a station break.

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HARTZ: We are devoting this entire hour to an interview with the outgoing Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Mr. William Colby. He is in our Washington News Center with Douglas Kiker and Ford Rowan. And I'd like to ask a question, if I might, here.

Mr. Colby, the defenders of the CIA say that much of the criticism that has been directed against it recently has been unfair, because most of the activities that are carried out by the CIA, those that have been criticized most heavily, have been directives from the President and from the National Security Council.

Could you enlighten us on how decisions are made and how orders are given to the CIA?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I think that it is clear that CIA's activities are essentially directed by the President, the National Security Council and follow congressional briefings and operate on congressionally appropriated funds. There's no question about. There are a few occasions over the past years in which CIA did things that it should not have done. We have corrected that and stopped that. But I believe that the strong emphasis of the attackers of CIA in this past year have been on a very small percentage of its total activities. The covert operations that we hear criticized contain only about something like five percent of so of our budget at the moment. And the vast amount of our effort is devoted to pure intelligence gathering and assessment.

KIKER: Let me continue along that line, Mr. Colby. According to State Department officials who testified before

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Congress recently, nearly forty secret CIA operations were -- between 1972 and 1974 were approved without a single meeting of the White House group known as the Forty Committee that's supposed to approve such things. The implication is that Secretary of State Kissinger and Mr. Ford and Mr. Nixon said yes or no.

First of all, is this correct? And secondly, when you are ordered to conduct such a covert operation is there any way for you to know, short of going into the White House and knocking on the door and asking directly, whether or not the President was actually informed of the decision to go ahead?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I know that the President is informed of these because we discuss them from time to time. We know very well that he knows about different activities. And under the present, if CIA does anything other than pure intelligence gathering abroad, it must be the subject of a specific finding by the President, with his signature on it.

KIKER: Well, these forty decisions, for example -- the Joint Chiefs of Staff, we are told, were conferred with by telephone sometimes, sometimes not; sometimes this person, sometimes that person. It would seem that Mr. Kissinger and the President were saying "Well, let's go ahead with it." Two men. Is that correct?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, essentially, what that report refers to is the fact that we had a procedure by which all of our activities had to be reported each year. There weren't necessarily forty new activities that were approved. But we gave annual round-ups, periodic reports of things that were happening, things that really didn't involve much policy discussion and no particular problems.

During that period, quite frankly, there was very little going on in this field that required that kind of review.

ROWAN: Mr. Colby, let me ask you about another decision of the President, Secretary of State and yourself -- the one in Angola. Was the decision, or is there now -- let me ask you that way -- is there now any American personnel, either from the CIA or from the Defense Department, operating in Angola? Are you using any CIA aircraft or Defense Department aircraft to supply friendly forces in Angola?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, the basic answer is that there are no Americans fighting in Angola, period. The early references to Angola as being a new Vietnam really are totally absurd, because the point about CIA's covert operations is that we are able

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able to do things without large commitments of American forces and instead of the commitment, as I've said before, of the United States Marines in a situation which requires some intervention, some activity by us. We have a situation now where we have a Soviet destroyer, a Soviet cruiser, Soviet LST, Soviet oilers in the neighborhood off West Africa. There's no question about it: the Soviets are expressing their interest in that area.

Now to say that CIA should not give some help to some friends who are trying to struggle against a desire by the Soviets and the Cubans and their group that they're manipulating and supporting I think is the height of absurdity. Sure, Angola is far away. But in the thirties, Abyssinia was far away. And in 1931, Manchuria was far away. And we got into an awful lot of trouble because we ignored those things that were far away.

RIKER: Let me ask you, to change the subject again -- ask you about Italy. The word is out that the CIA funneled nearly six million dollars to noncommunist politicians in Italy. Two questions. First of all, does it do any good? Just yesterday the centrist, quote, "coalition" broke down. Secondly, should we be doing it? What would be the reaction in the United States if we learned here that Italy had funneled six million dollars to American politicians?

DIRECTOR COLBY: We have not spent a nickel in Italy in the past few months, to be specific about it. We have not done so. I cannot discuss what our plans, what our thoughts might be for the future.

Should the United States help its friends in a friendly country to keep that country from coming under communist control and having the Communist Party be the majority party in that country? I think the United States can help its friends. We did help our friends in Western Europe after World War II. We helped them through military force, through NATO. We helped them through economic aid, through the Marshall Plan. And we helped several of the democratic parties and forces throughout Western Europe to sustain themselves against a subversive effort by the communists and their Soviet masters.

ROWAN: You say you haven't spent any money yet. But you do plan to, don't you?

DIRECTOR COLBY: I am not at liberty to discuss the details of our activities. But I think I can say that we have not spent any money, period.

RIKER: Let's talk about the CIA's involvement here at home. Your charter prohibits you from operating in any way in

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the United States. And yet there was disclosure after disclosure from these hearings.

Let's not really rehash old things. How can we prevent what happened from happening again? Is it possible for the CIA to police itself? Are we going to have a situation five years from now where we hear about other Americans' mail being investigated and opened, and so forth and so forth?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, you're certainly aren't going to hear about any that took place while I've been Director, because in 1973, shortly after I became Director, I issued a set of directives to insure that CIA stayed within its proper legal charter and its proper legal authorities.

It is easy to keep CIA within its rules just by issuing the proper directives and making it clear that we're expected to. I think, yes, in the past twenty-eight years, CIA strayed toward the edge. But the exhaustive investigation conducted by the Rockefeller Commission I think gives a fair statement of what actually happened, that there were some few cases in which we did step over the line, either at the direct request of a President, because the line was somewhat fuzzy, or, in a very few cases, because there was an excess of enthusiasm or zeal to do the job of following the counterintelligence problem in the United States.

KIKER: Did you get drawn into it gradually, or did you think you'd never get caught? Were you just following orders? I say "you." Not you personally, but the agency.

DIRECTOR COLBY: Yes. I think that the times that various of these things were done, like intercepting mail between the United States and the Soviet Union -- this began in the early fifties. Now in the early fifties there was a great deal of concern in this country about Soviet spies in America. And we caught a number of them, and they existed, and there was a great deal of concern that there were a lot of other ones here. And in the effort to insure that we would not be subject to this kind of activity by the Soviet Union, we opened mail, which we should not have done and which we will not do again.

But I think the framework in which that occurred reflected a consensus of the American people and government that something had to be done.

KIKER: Well, what's to stop you? Excuse me. But what's to stop you? You did it before. What if the next President of the United States tells the next Director of the CIA "open mail"? What's to stop him from doing it?

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DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I think this year's investigation is the best answer to that. I think the thing that will really stop it is clear guidelines, which I say we have issued. And if anybody wants to issue it upon us, that's fine.

Secondly, better supervision, because, in the past, there's no question about it: intelligence was told to go and do the job and not to bother people with the details. We have to have good supervision. We have to have, as I said earlier, responsible supervision which doesn't expose everything in the guise of supervising it. But nonetheless, steady, regular, constant supervision by the Congress, by the executive I think will insure that CIA stays within its proper charter in the future.

KIKER: I interrupted you, Ford.

ROWAN: No, that's all right. I wanted to follow up on another area of domestic activity that's frightened a lot of people, and that's the drug testing, specifically about MK ULTRA, the program of testing substances on people. An Inspector-General's report from 1963 said the effectiveness of these drugs on individuals of all social levels, high and low, native American and foreign, is of great significance, and testing's been performed on a variety of individuals, including some that didn't know they were being tested.

Now apparently, according to the Inspector-General's report, the scope of NK [sic] ULTRA was not just drugs. It included radiation, electroshock, various techniques of psychology, psychiatry, graphology, harassment substances and paramilitary devices and materials. Did you do those sort of things on people here or abroad?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Again, let's refer to the time we're talking about. In the early fifties, the mid fifties when we saw Cardinal Mindszenty standing there with those haunting eyes, when our troops were captured in North Korea and brain-washed, there was a great deal of concern about the possible effects of drugs and other kinds of devices to affect human behavior. And there was some experimentation that went on at that time. And that Inspector-General's report in 1963 is what terminated that kind of experimentation outside of the normal rules of volunteer knowing subjects.

ROWAN: Let me follow up by asking not about MK ULTRA, but about MK DELTA, which was the operational side of the coin. And I don't believe that very much attention's been given to that. But it was reported in this report that the operational aspects were in the hundreds, that these techniques, these substances had been used overseas in the hundreds. Can you confirm that?

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DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, when I was in Norway in World War II and was skiing over the back mountains there, I got up several hills thanks to some good benzedrine that somebody in our chemical business had provided me before I went on that operation.

Yes, there are uses for drugs in intelligence operations, and they did use them on some occasions. But I think the only death that we know of was the unfortunate death of Mr. Olsen, which certainly we have done our best to make amends for.

KIKER: I think Jim Hartz has a question.

Jim?

HARTZ: Yes, one final question, Mr. Colby, sort of pointing in the direction of where the CIA is going. We've seen some changes here. It seems as if you're trying to go on the offensive. You're here on this broadcast. It's almost unheard of in the past for the Director of the agency to appear publicly. The other day I noticed that President Ford had gone to a funeral for the agent who was killed in Athens. That's almost unheard of. Usually presidential appearances at funerals are reserved for heads of state, high elected officials, and so on.

May I ask you about that? Why was he at that funeral? Why are you here now? What are you trying to do?

DIRECTOR COLBY: Well, I think President Ford -- the best answer to that is what he told me when I thanked him for coming to that funeral. He said he felt very strongly about it, and so do we. Mr. Welch was a brave and effective intelligence officer who died in the service of his country. I think that he spent his life for our country, and also he died for it.

KIKER: Well, you won't have a chance to tell us why you came here. But we do want to thank you for coming, Mr. Colby, and it's been very educational. Thank you again.

DIRECTOR COLBY: Thank you.

KIKER: William Colby, Director of the CIA. The Today show will continue right after this message.